

SOME REMARKS ON THE STYLE
OF SOME BUDDHIST SANSKRIT TEXTS

1. When dealing with Buddhist literature, particularly with the *sūtra*s of the Mahāyāna and the Prajñāpāramitātexts, one frequently meets with a great number of repetitions of phrases, as well as with a certain hyperbolism in the featuring of scenes composed for the proliferation of the doctrine. This stylistic character of the scriptures in question not seldom makes the thorough perusal of the texts a rather tedious occupation which draws heavily upon the patience of not only the occidental reader. We can clearly feel this when reading e.g. in Nariman's « Literary History of Sanskrit Buddhism »: « The senseless customs of embodying constant repetitions which we find so annoying in the Pāli suttas becomes in the voluminous Prajnaparamitas so limitless and excessive that it would be quite possible to strike out more than half of these colossal works like the Shatasahasrika, for the same sentences and phrases recur times without number »¹.

This statement implies the view that it is the *only* purpose of these texts to impart a contents to the reader that is to be expressed completely by words and to be grasped exclusively by the discriminating power of the mind, viz. the intellect (*buddhi*).

I would like to express my doubts as to the exhaustiveness of this view. Before going into the details and coming forward with another point of view, I would like to draw the attention on two attempts to cope with the stylistic difficulties of this type of literature.

2. When judging the stylistic value of ancient Buddhist prose, Hermann Oldenberg came to the conclusion that on the one hand a certain oriental — monkish tranquillity would express itself in the repetitious style, on the other hand the authors of this prose had not yet developed

1. J. K. NARIMAN, *Literary History of Sanskrit Buddhism*, Bombay, 1919, repr. Delhi, 1972, p. 96.

the ability to compose a literature characterized by fresh and colourful movements of the narration².

Nonetheless, Oldenberg seems to have felt that the « stilistic shortcomings » of the texts must not necessarily have had their reason in an undeveloped command of stilistic means on the part of the authors. So, he comes forward with a carefully pondered hypothesis: « Or, may we even look at it in such a way that not only *inspite* of [the clumsiness of the narration], but rather *because* of it an effect has been added to the venerating gravity of those who are talking here, an effect that perhaps would not have been brought about by higher developed stilistic alertness? »³.

In other words, Oldenberg brings in a *psychological* element that seems to fit quite well in the environment and spiritual climate of the monk-religion. He remembers that the texts have been composed by monks who were used measuring every movement according to strict rules and with scrupulous exactness⁴.

How can one expect from such people a literary « extravagance for the sake of extravagance » (Nariman) or for the sake of aesthetic enjoyment? Did they compensate certain frustrations caused by their austere way of life by composing hyperbolic literary works of art? Were they literary gourmets? It is hard to believe.

3. Some years ago, Georg von Simson has tried to do justice to the stilistic implications of « some dogmatic texts of the Buddhist Sanskrit canon » by means of a most detailed analysis, employing the rich arsenal of classical rhetorics and including all peculiarities of the aesthetic dimensions from phonetics to bigger complexes of phraseology⁵. As an explanation of the stilistic repetitions he has in view mainly their mnemotechnical importance. But he also hints at the psychological impact when writing: « The psychological effect on the listener would have been such that after a period of adjustment his consciousness got into a certain vibration; the beginning of such a series of words brought about in him a chain-reaction which gave him the feeling of perfect harmony of the perception of the heard contents and the intellectual realization »⁶. According to von Simson, there did, however, not exist any rhetorical theory behind this practise, for the Buddhist way of thinking would certainly not have favoured the development of a psychagogic technique that enables its master to rule over the souls of

2. Cf. HERMANN OLDENBERG, *Zur Geschichte der altindischen Prosa*, Abh. d. kgl. Gesellschaft d. Wiss. zu Göttingen, Phil.-hist. Klasse, N.F. Bd. XVI, Berlin, 1917, p. 39 sqq., particularly p. 52.

3. OLDENBERG, *op. cit.*, p. 48; my translation.

4. OLDENBERG, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

5. G. VON SIMSON, *Zur Diktion einiger Lehrtexte des buddhistischen Sanskritkanons*, in « Münchner Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft », Beiheft H., 1965.

6. Cf. G. VAN SIMSON, *op. cit.*, p. 143 sq.; my translation.

his listeners according to his own sweet will and to employ them with a view to any profane end⁷.

This conceded, I still doubt, whether a psychagogic technique of this sort can only be applied in this sense and for such a purpose.

Is it not possible — and, particularly in the spiritual ambiente of the Mahāyāna, most probably not off the track — that a refined psychagogic technique has in fact been employed in the composition of the text; a technique that adds to the dimensions of literary style and aesthetic experience that of *contemplation*?

In order to confirm this view, I would like to recollect in short words the « *Citta-mātra-doctrine* » as pointed out in the *Laṅkāvatāra-Sūtra*(L).

4. Truth, according to the L, is clearly different from what can be reached by means of philosophical endeavour. It is identical with Buddhahood which, when reached, means the end of *saṃsāra* (which presents itself as the total of all possible and actual particular perceptions)⁸. World, according to this doctrine, consists exclusively of « magically transformed images », *vikalpa*-s, brought about by mind-projection. Objects, whether perceived as extra-mental beings or not, do not possess any reality apart from and independent of *citta*. When the act of perception takes place, the imprints (*saṃskāra*-s) stored in the *ālaya-vijñāna* are projected and constitute the name and form of the object.

« When the triple world is surveyed [...] he perceives that this existence is due to memory (*vāṣana*) that has been accumulated since the beginningless past but wrongly interpreted »⁹.

« The triple world, so-called, is therefore the shadow of a self-reflecting and self-creating mind. Hence the doctrine of "mind-only" (*citta-mātra*) »¹⁰.

Outside of the world-experience which consists of (wrong) *vikalpa* there is only that knowledge which the L. calls *pratyātma-ārya-jñāna-gocara* or *svasiddhānta*. It is pure experience and identical with Buddhahood. He who has this experience « recognisez that Buddhahood is a state imageless, unborn, and to be inwardly experienced by oneself, when the mind becomes fully controlled and purposeless deeds are accomplished »¹¹.

Thus, it is the continuous mind-projections (*vikalpa*) that separate the individual from Buddhahood. If Buddhahood is to be reached, consequently the *vāṣana*-s (which are the stuff out of which this dream-

7. G. VAN SIMSON, *op. cit.*, p. 147; my translation.

8. Cf. D. T. SUZUKI, *Studies in the Laṅkāvatāra-Sūtra*, London/Boston, 1930, repr. 1972, p. 71 and *passim*.

9. SUZUKI, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

10. SUZUKI, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

11. SUZUKI, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

world is made) must be eliminated. The mind (*citta*, *ālaya*) has to be purified. How will that be possible?

5. The *L.* teaches: « When these [sc. the *ālaya* or where the *garbha* is oriented] are well discriminated, there is emancipation and seeing into the truth; by moral cultivation and intellectual training the evil passions are abandoned and made pure »¹².

A first step in this training-program will be the forming of positive *saṃskāra*-s that can dominate the negative ones in the *citta*. This can be fostered by cultivating good habits and by dealing with the suiting intellectual contents. The obstinacy of world-experience that separates from Buddhahood is based on the fact that every perception, thought or action strengthens the *saṃskāra*-s and adds to the stock of *vāsaṇa*-s. The impact of an imprint in the *citta* is proportional to the frequency of its repetition.

6. What does this mean in connection with our stylistic questions? Remembering that meditation forms a most important feature of Buddhist monk — life (cf. *Dhammapada*, v. 301), at the same time being aware of the fact that even an already well — trained mind cannot meditate easily for all the twenty-four hours of the day, one comes to the conclusion that an excellent means (*upāya*) of keeping the mind busy in high topics is the study of scriptures. Therefore our texts. But, according to the practical side of the *cittamātra*-doctrine, it very much depends, in which way the doctrine is presented. If it is studied in the form of an interesting, logically constructed discursus, its effect will be comparable to that of the study of any other morally highly standardized doctrine — as far as the training of the mind is concerned. New contents is imparted, positive *vikalpa*-s take place, no doubt. The world will be seen in a different light. But the end of *saṃsāra*, the destruction of the structure of thinking, will not be brought about. The categories of space, time, and causation, which form the frame of our world-experience, are not touched in the least. Thus, *saṃsāra* will go on.

As far as I can see, those literary means which have been called « hyperbole in the figurative language » (e.g. « There lives a Buddha forty hundred thousand myriads of ten million aeons, as many as there are grains of sand in the river Ganges », and similar cases¹³) are meant to bring about an actual change of consciousness (in our example: concerning the category of time).

What happens is this: The monk who studies the text projects — as long as he is busy with reading or listening — the subtle mental

12. SUZUKI, *op. cit.*, 255.

13. NARIMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 69 sq.

pictures concerned, which are brought up, as it were, from the *ālaya* by the activity of *citta*. The more concentrated he keeps these pictures in front of his « inner eye » the stronger they will again be imprinted.

Since they break with the conventional time — structure, they can be used to counter — act it. This seems to be the deeper meaning of the frequently found « castles-in-the-air », as well as of the statement:

« There is neither the seer nor the seen, neither the speaker nor the spoken, the form and usage of the Buddhist works — they are nothing but discrimination »¹⁴.

That means: During the process of study of the scriptures, there is an exchange of *vikalpa* against *vikalpa* in the mind (*citta*) of the student. The contents that breaks with the conventional categories of space, time, and causation, counter-act the deepest *vāsana*-s. The possibility of mastering the structure of thinking announces itself.

7. And what about the repetitions? It is not only necessary to dominate old *saṃskāra*-s by new ones, but they have to be reduced more and more, till they finally disappear. If the texts repeat very often the same words and imaginations, the mass of *vāsana*-s actually produced anew will be reduced. The *citta* in its continuous projecting activity comes to the same subtle pictures ever and ever again. After a period of adjustment, a comparatively high concentration of the mind — power on few projections will be the desirable result. To draw the line further: after having become well versed in this type of training of the mind, the monk can proceed with the concentration on simpler structures, *yantra*-s, *dhāraṇī*-s, etc.

In that way — I think — the stilistic peculiarity of the Mahāyāna-*Sūtras* and the Prajñāpāramitā-texts play an important part in the spiritual training of the monk with a view to his contemplative ability. Therefore, one would certainly diminish the spiritual value of such texts by leaving out the numerous repetitions.

8. To come to the conclusion, I would like to mention that the laws of functioning of the human mind that have been adduced here in order to explain the deeper meaning of the stilistic peculiarities of the Buddhist texts in question are not confined to the teachings of the one or the other school of thought in ancient India. What has been pointed out in the *Laṅkāvatāra-Sūtra* illustrates in fact central processes of the human mind and *psychē* that can be experimentally verified by everybody who is willing and able to provide for the necessary experimental conditions. In our days, these subtle mental processes have been described and explained with rare clarity in the works of the master-

14. SUZUKI, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

The following sentences illustrate the subtle mental process (ibid.):
*samanatarabhāṣitā ceyam bhagavatā vāg atheyam sahālokadhātuḥ
 samantāt sphuṭitā visphuṭitābhūt tebhyaś ca sphoṭāntarebhyo bahūni
 bodhisattvakoṭīnayutaśatasahasrāṇyuttiṣṭhante sma suvarṇavarṇaiḥ
 kāyairdvātriṃśadbhirmahāpuruṣalakṣaṇaiḥ samanvāgatāḥ / ye 'syām
 mahāprthivyām adha ākāśadhātau viharanti sma...*

Cf. also cap. 11, p. 243, for a similar process:

*atha khalu bhagavāṃstasyām velāyāmūrṇākośādraśmiṃ prāmuñcat /
 yayā raśmyā samanantarapramuktyā pūrvasyām diśi pañcāśatsu gaṇ-
 gānadīvālukāsameṣu lokadhātukoṭīnayutaśatasahasreṣu ye buddhā
 bhagavanto viharanti sma te sarve saṃdṛśyante sma / ...*

ad n. 14) B.N. p. 9, v. 43, s.a.